ADVENTURES WITH SPEEDBOATS

By COMMANDER G. PAGANO DI MELITO

The battle of the small against the big has always captured human imagination, be it the struggle of David with Goliath or of Yoshitsune Minamoto with the giant Benkei—or of the tiny speedboats against battleships. In this latter field, no other navy has as much experience as the Italian. It was the first to adopt motor speedboats, and it scored spectacular successes both in the first and second World Wars. One member of the small group of men who developed the speedboat from an idea to an effective instrument of war, the author of the following article, is at present living in Shanghai.

Commander Gennaro Pagano di Melito, fired by the pen of Gabriele d'Annunzio and led by Costanzo Ciano (father of the present Italian Foreign Minister), distinguished himself during the first World War as the commander of small "MAS" boats against large enemy naval units and transport vessels.

Because of his brilliant war career, Marquis Pagano di Melito was decorated nine times. He was also promoted twice for distinguished war service. After the war, Commander Pagano di Melito was among the first to join the Fascist movement and held very important posts in Italy. He was later appointed Italian Consul-General in Hongkong and in 1940 was transferred to Shanghai in the same capacity.—K.M.

SOCRATES, strolling one day in the streets of Athens, stopped before the smoky den of a famous Greek armorer and asked him:

"How do you make the most powerful of your swords?"

"I try the swords against the strongest of my shields until I find one that pierces it," answered the man.

"And how do you make the strongest shield?" Socrates asked then.

"I test many of them with my strongest sword until I find one which breaks my sword."

This subtle dialogue illustrates the dual nature of all war implements which has existed ever since man wielded his first weapon and which will persist for ever on this troublesome planet up to the end of mankind.

On the other hand, strategy and tactics are greatly dependent on the development of war material and of armament inventions. Sometimes the oddest of new devices bring about unbelievable revolutions in the art of war and overthrow all established ideas and dogmas laid down by the various schools of strategy.

Thus the tactics of Austerlitz, Marengo, or Trafalgar would have resulted in disaster if employed in the battles of Tannenberg or Jutland; just as twenty-five years of intensified production and improvements in armored cars, bombers, and submarines have been quite enough to render obsolete the strategies of these latter victories. It is from this angle that we shall discuss the genesis and development of speedboats.

"MAS"—AN INAPPROPRIATE NAME

The keels of the first speedboats were laid down in 1915 in a small racing-craft shipyard in Venice. The speedboat was a natural consequence of the materialization of submarine warfare with Otto Weddigen's marvelous exploit of sinking in thirty minutes the three British cruisers *Hogue*, *Cressy*, and *Aboukir* off the Flemish coast. The speedboats were intended to counteract submarines. Hence they were christened "MAS" (*Motoscafo Anti Sommergibile*—Motorboats Against Submarines), a name which still persists, though very inappropriate, as we shall demonstrate later.

At the beginning they were designed for attack, with even a torpedo tube

being installed. But, as the stability of the boats was seriously endangered thereby, the idea was given up, and the boats were only armed with a small gun and two machine guns of 6 mm caliber. They attained a maximum speed of 25 miles per hour with a radius of 150 miles.

The first six boats were ready in February 1916 and were sent to Brindisi, where the first MAS squadron was formed under the command of two lieutenants.

The first acquaintance with the boats was somewhat disheartening! Apart from the fact that everybody looked on them with contempt, the two commanders of the 1st Squadriglia MAS (I was one of them) were not proud of them, for, after the first week of trials, they had met with only difficulties and failure.

The small gun was no use. One hundred rounds had been wasted on an old oil drum left floating on the waves outside the mine barrage, without scoring a single hit. Aiming at any target was practically impossible owing to the instability of the platform. Finally we had to sink the damned thing by holing it with a boat hook! From the ramparts of a near-by coastal battery, a group of lazy gunners were enjoying the show, with bursts of mirth at every foul shot of ours!

HIDE AND SEEK

Another day, we were sent out to practise periscope scouting. A submarine, her commander a colleague of ours, had gone to a prearranged place. She was to lie in wait there, showing her periscope from time to time, and we were to rush at full speed to the spot in order to show that we had detected her. She would then submerge and move to some other place and repeat the performance. After two hours of straining our eyes, we swore the man was fooling us. But—there was the submarine coming to the surface only thirty yards away, with an angry captain showing his apoplectic face from the turret's cover and shouting at us to know if we were sleeping or what, or if we were making a fool of him! He had been showing his periscope twenty times only fifty yards away; he could have counted the hairs on our silly faces . . . so he said!

Furthermore, it turned out that he had detected our propellers with his hydrophone when we were five miles away.

So we were able to establish from the very first that our boats were at a great disadvantage against a submarine. The explanation was very simple. First, our eyes being hardly above sea level, our vision was extremely limited and our perspective practically nil. Secondly, the noise caused by our motors and propellers was such that no submarine commander would ever be foolish enough to expose his craft to our torpedoes or depth charges. He would simply dive and remain submerged until he could hear the enemy far away once more.

"After all, the name MAS is well chosen," said our colleague from the submarine sarcastically when we met him at the officers' mess that night, "Antisubmarine boats indeed! They will certainly keep all submarines away—from themselves!"

A DISCOVERY

But the faith of neophites was upon us, and at length, after interminable arguments and sleepless nights, a scheme, a mad scheme, materialized. We discovered that the speed boats *were practically invisible at night*. In a mist they were also almost invisible even in day time. So we turned back to the idea of torpedoes.

If the original scheme of a torpedo tube for one torpedo had been discarded for the sake of stability, we now solved the problem by planning to carry two torpedoes on the sides of the boats instead of one on top. It turned out that the MAS could carry almost one ton of weight on each side even in a moderately rough sea. Moreover, running the risk of capsizing the boat, we dropped the weight from one side only, going at full speed . . . and the boat did not capsize. We had at last discovered some positive qualities in our beloved boats.

Presently we disclosed the results of our experiments to a commission of scornful technicians. For every piece of withering opposition we had a practical answer pat, and we won. After two months, we secured Admiral Cutinelli's permission for a test with real torpedoes. We worked like niggers, day and night, together with our loyal sailors and mechanics. We did not allow any outsider to meddle with our work.

It was on April 20, 1916, that we first tried launching a real torpedo. We tried it under every condition of speed and sea. The trials were all successful!

ADMIRAL CAGNI'S BLESSING

Admiral Cutinelli had given up the command of Brindisi a fortnight before for the more important post of Commander of the Fleet. Admiral Cagni had taken his place.

It is impossible to put into words the strong fascination that Cagni's stern face had for all of us. It was perhaps the nimbus of his glorious past that worked upon our imaginations. . . . I can only relate that I felt as if my heart would jump into my throat when, half an hour before starting out upon our great venture, he called Berardinelli and me into his cabin aboard the flagship.

No, it was not the same face. It was not the same voice. His eyes, fixed on us, had a strange softness that wholly transformed the man. He said:

"The strength of your will power has given you both the chance and the honor to accomplish tonight a new ordeal in the naval history of this war: the forcing of an enemy naval base with your small boats. Believe me, my lads," he said with a melancholy smile, "I would gladly change places with you tonight. Fortune will certainly be at your side. She is not the blindfolded woman some would have her; on the contrary she loves to favor the brave. May God be with you!"

The following hours passed as in a dream. We left Brindisi and were towed by two torpedo boats towards Durazzo, the Dyrrachium of ancient times which, two thousand years before, had seen the galleys of Julius Caesar and his legions marching to fight Pompey. Now the Austrians were there. They had established at Durazzo a naval supply base for their army operating against our positions on the Vojussa and at Valona, the key of the Adriatic.

THE FIRST SUCCESS

It was pitch dark when the torpedo boats left us to our fate . . . .

We approached carefully at low speed. I knew the place very well. In fact, I was in command of our landing party when, six months before, we had had our last fight against the numerically superior Austrian troops coming from Elbassan. I knew every detail of the coast, so we had no difficulty in steering our course for Durazzo Roads and towards the harbor.

We were almost there when we detected the dark silhouettes of two enemy destroyers coming out from Durazzo. We prepared to attack; but, alas! the two destroyers disappeared at full speed in the dark towards the open sea. So we resumed our former direction.

The boats glided noiselessly over the smooth waters of the inner bay. Ashore, just ahead of us, a red light shone like a ruby. Every minute seemed like an hour. We could already see the dark hulk of a Greek steamer sunk by Austrian cruisers a year before, when lo! there appeared, just in front of us, the black silhouette of a big steamer. Full speed ahead! The boat jumped under our feet. Fire!

My starboard torpedo flashed away like a strange wild sea devil taken by a sudden fury. Its phosphorescent wake ran towards the middle of the doomed ship. I could see a dark spout of spray and sand bursting with a deep thud astern of the ship.

My torpedo? No, impossible. It must be Berardinelli's. Long moments of suspense and then another terrible thud, a gigantic column of water fanned out on

the side of our target just under the funnel . . . .

Screams, a dying whistle of agony, came from the sinking ship. The speed of my boat had brought me nearly alongside of her. I could hear the turmoil of voices, of escaping steam, of cries for help . . . . I still remember the ferocious sensation invading my breast—perhaps the return of primeval instincts bursting through the veneer of my humanistic education. . . .

DUELS ON MOONLESS NIGHTS

The attacks carried out by the 1st Squadriglia MAS were repeated every month during the period of moonless nights up to the end of the year. A strange duel took shape between the Squadriglia and the Durazzo defense. For every new device of the defenders we thought up a new method of attack. The hills around Durazzo harbor were alive with searchlights and batteries, so that the approach became more and more difficult. We tried seven times, and only three times with positive results.

The last attack took place on the night of November 3 of the same year and was the most dramatic one. Playing hide-and-seek with a powerful searchlight which scanned the sea every ten minutes, and, by a miracle, escaping the observation of six batteries, we managed to approach the obstructions sheltering a large transport.

Unfortunately my colleague, Berardinelli, had left the MAS service for reasons of health. So I found myself alone and confronted with a very critical situation. I could not launch my torpedoes because I knew, from an air observation of the same day, that a barrage net protected the steamer. So I had to run the risk of entangling my propellers in the barrage net, over which I had to drive half of my boat in order to launch my torpedoes inside.

But the enemy had heard the buzzing of our motors, and a very fast tugboat, heavily armed with quick-firing guns and machine guns, had approached the barrage on the other side of the steamer. They saw the other MAS which, at the crucial moment, had dropped behind some fifty meters and opened fire on it just when I was on the barrage. I launched my torpedoes while the alarm was spreading all around. Searchlights were lighted and turned on us from the surrounding hills. I disentangled the boat and turned tail at full speed, convinced that both my torpedoes had exploded against the side of the steamer. Alas, after the war it turned out that, on account of the shallow water, they had exploded against the bottom thirty meters from the target! (Torpedoes in the first phase of their course describe a curve about ten or twelve meters deep, to resume, as soon as they are at full speed, the depth regulated in advance.)

BATTLE OF WITS

All this time we ourselves as well as the defenders of Durazzo were accumulating experience; yet I must acknowledge that we were the losers in that silent battle of wits.

We had acquired a strange sense of invulnerability as far as enemy gunfire was concerned. But we felt a great respect for their observation posts and their searchlights. We made experiments and discovered that it was the foam of our wake, even when moving at a very moderate speed, that betrayed us to the searchlights. But the chief drawback was the noise of our motors, which, in still air or in a carrying breeze, was audible at a considerable distance.

Followed interminable arguments and speculation. In the meantime, fifty new boats were under construction, and we had to run here and there during full-moon periods to the different shipyards. From all these discussions great improvements resulted which were tested in a daring attack in the Fasana Channel, on the outskirts of Pola, the famous enemy base in the northern Adriatic.

Lieutenant Commander Ildebrando Goiran on the night of November 2 of

the same year, 1916, entered the channel with a MAS equipped for the first time with electric motors, and, after cunning and very difficult and dangerous maneuvering, managed to launch two torpedoes at the old battleship *Hans*. But she had a double protection of nets, and the torpedoes were stopped. The Durazzo incursions had taught the enemy some good lessons indeed!

COSTANZO CIANO AND LUIGI RIZZO

Since January 1917 the whole Flotilla MAS had been placed under the command of a first-class sailor and man of action, Commander Costanzo Ciano, the father of the present Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

It was under his personal command that, on the morning of November 17, 1917, a detachment of three MAS attacked in full daylight a formation of two battleships and ten torpedo boats which were bombarding our positions at Cortellazzo at the mouth of the river Piave. The MAS were sighted, and they met with a hail of shells of all calibers from the twelve enemy units. Nevertheless, they managed to approach and launch their torpedoes, but no damage was done because the enemy had sufficient time to turn tail and avoid them.

It was on account of this gallant act that His Majesty the King later bestowed on Costanzo Ciano the title of Count of Cortellazzo.

Some weeks later, on the night of December 9/10, one of our comrades, Luigi Rizzo, suddenly leaped into the limelight of courage and fame.

With his two MAS, equipped with a special device for cutting submarine wire ropes and nets, he had the pluck and coolness to force a passage between the outer breakwaters of Muggia (Trieste) and torpedo and sink the Austrian battleship *Wien*. Furthermore, machine-gunning a group of sentries at the head of the breakwaters, he was able to regain the open sea and get safely back to Venice with his two boats unscathed!

A DETAIL IS OVERLOOKED

The name of Costanzo Ciano came to the fore again when, on the night of February 10/11, 1918, he brought three motorboats to the end of the small bay of Buccari, the remotest recess of the Fiume Roads, with the object of torpedoing some ships and perhaps the men-of-war lying at anchor there.

The great difficulty of this action lay in the fact that the three MAS had to cover almost fifty miles of narrow channels guarded by the Pola naval base at their entrance. Even if they were lucky enough to succeed in entering, they would, as a result of the subsequent alarm, almost certainly find the whole fleet of enemy destroyers on their way. But the will to emulate Rizzo's exploit was too strong in us: all prudent considerations were put aside. I say "us" because I personally, together with my unforgettable commander Ciano, attended to the preparation of every detail of the action.

We were to use new motorboats with a speed of 32 miles an hour. For the first time the three boats were taken from the Leghorn shipyard to Venice *by rail*. It was a new experiment; perhaps it has inspired the method used nowadays of transporting motorboats by rail from Italy to Lake Ladoga and to the Black Sea, with the telling results the world has seen. The invariably pessimistic horoscopes of "experts" (May God preserve us in war time from experts!) were given the lie when the three boats reached Venice in two days without suffering any damage and were ready for action during the approaching moonless nights.

How and why I could not participate in the action is another story, as Kipling used to say. The fact is that everything went like clockwork, except for a detail that was overlooked by all. The practical result was nil because the torpedoes did not explode! The bitter disappointment of that memorable night taught us an invaluable lesson, which was: Never undertake any war operation unless the

man appointed for the preparation of it is there to participate in person.

"MAS" AND POETRY

The poet Gabriele d'Annunzio had joined Commander Ciano's crew on the night of Buccari. He wrote a wonderful little book on the action, *La Beffa Buccari*, and composed a poem which renders in a powerful and moving way the soul of our unforgettable crews. The poet also composed the motto so dear to the whole MAS brotherhood: *Memento Audere Semper* ("Remember to dare all the time"). He also composed the Latin distich of the new moon. (We of the MAS hated the full moon because moonlight spoilt our trump card, that of being practically invisible at night.) The distich runs:

> "*Tibi cornua nigrescunt*
> *Nobis arma dum clarescunt*,"

which means:

> While thy horns blacken
> Our weapons sharpen.

The book enjoyed great popularity among the Italian public, which knew little or nothing about our boats. So the participants in the Buccari exploit attained the fame they so well deserved notwithstanding their bad luck.

After the sinking of the *Wien* and the action at Buccari, there was a long spell before another occasion was offered the MAS to attack enemy units.

The new Commander in Chief of the Austrian Navy was a very shrewd and able man. The forcing of minor bases or harbors was now out of the question. Defenses had been reinforced to such a degree that our Staff decided to change tactics; henceforth the MAS were employed for nocturnal ambushes in the narrow channels along the Dalmatian coast or on the approaches to the Albanian ports.

WHAT IS LUCK ?

Is there such a thing as luck in war? I do not believe it. If Fortune is really that fickle and blindfolded deity of the old myth, you cannot expect her to favor you unless you force a passage and place yourself within her reach. So, in the end, Fortune is nothing but the will to succeed. (My friend d'Annunzio used to give a more daring definition. He said that Fortune was a strong, voluptuous, and fickle woman, and that such women could only be won by force.)

Because of this difference of opinion, I shall explain why the chance of meeting one night an enemy formation of two destroyers escorting a big liner loaded with troops and war materials had to come just to me.

I was called one day to Brindisi to escort two monitors to Valona. It was a boring business indeed, but orders are orders, even if they are silly orders. So I left my bride (I had got married shortly before) and went to Brindisi. There I found that the monitors needed some engine repairs. Besides, the commander of the MAS squadron there had an attack of malaria. It was new moon. Would I oblige the MAS commander and take his place in an ambush outside Durazzo?

Ambushes on Durazzo were a daily routine. Every dark, moonless night, two MAS went there and came back next morning, having wasted four tons of good gasoline for nothing. The Austrians now navigated only by day, with naval and air escorts. We considered ambushes over there as a fixed idea of our Chief of Staff!

So we went to Durazzo with two first-class boats of my new model. On the other MAS was my second-in-command, Lieutenant Mario Azzi, a splendid man, who, together with me, had planned an attack on the naval base of Cattaro. The orders were to stop two miles off Cape Durazzo, and we stopped there. But after one hour I could not resist the temptation to proceed into the bay. We arrived unseen at a point five hundred meters from the barrages. We could plainly see the ships sunk by us the year before. No new target inside the barrages; so, rather disappointed, we turned back again.

At this instant, the unbelievable happened. A signal station on the hill

started to flash a message. It was obvious that they were not conversing with us. I looked towards the open sea, and lo! there was another light blinking in answer.

And so it happened that the convoy came in and passed right under our noses. We attacked at full speed half a mile from the base and sank a big liner, the *Bregenz*, loaded with troops, guns, and ammunition, and heavily damaged a small destroyer, the *Dukla*. Six hundred casualties, and an enormous moral effect which told heavily on the whole enemy organization in Albania.

Two nights after the sinking of the *Bregenz*, we approached her hull, which showed her decks above water by a meter or two. The sea was very smooth. We saw something dark floating on one of the holds. We caught it with our boat hooks. It was a bale of very good woollen blankets. Two of these blankets have kept me warm in winter ever since, and they are still on my bed here in Shanghai!

RIZZO SCORES AGAIN

But my beloved comrade Luigi Rizzo always went one better! One month later, on June 10, he attacked a formation of two Austrian dreadnoughts and six destroyers at dawn with his two boats. Everything was against him. But Rizzo defied the impossible. He coolly passed the screen of protection of the two men-of-war and sent his two torpedoes into the hull of the *Szent Istvan*. Closely pursued by a destroyer, he dropped a depth charge which exploded just beneath the pursuing boat. And so he disappeared into the twilight of morning and reached Ancona safely.

The whole naval world was upset by the result of Rizzo's action, and the moral effect on the Austrian Fleet was a hundredfold greater than on any other occasion. It may be asserted that from that day revolt spread in the Austrian Navy and the Austrian Supreme Command lost control over its crews. After that, events moved fatally towards the Austrian debacle of November 1918.

SOCRATES AND THE GERMAN NAVY

After Versailles it soon became apparent that this so-called peace was nothing but the vipers' nest of future wars.

In October 1921, the future Duce of the Italians wrote a famous article from which two principal thoughts stand out as prophecies. "Germany has never been defeated!" was the first, and "England has been and always will be our greatest enemy!" the second. The meaning of this was that our war front had shifted from the Adriatic to the Mediterranean and that we should be prepared for a future life-and-death struggle. Later on, it also became apparent that Germany and Italy were moving along parallel lines and developing that "Continental sense" which is the credo of European reconstruction of the future. What else but the closest co-operation in history could arise from this common ideal?

But no illusions! There was a struggle ahead. The attainment of our aims meant the downfall of a three-centuries-old autocratic empire. It meant a fearful war at sea, or, to be more exact, on the seven seas.

As always happens, the lessons of the war appealed much more to the loser than to the winner. Germany had lost the war but "had never been defeated," to quote the Duce's words.

And here Socrates' teaching reappears. In fact, in place of the ancient armorer, we find the inventive spirit of industrial Germany with its wonderful organization, with its will to regain her position and her world prestige. Germany remembered that she had lost victory by a hair's breadth, so she developed all her arms, capitalizing on the experiences and the lessons of the past war. All the other nations, dazzled by the glamour of their victory, were bound to perpetuate their old systems. Hence the lightning victories of Germany in the present war.

It is very strange that Germany was the only nation to devise positive improvements on speedboat strategy and tactics. In order to increase the sea-

worthiness of its speedboats, even in the rough waters of the North Sea and the English Channel, the German Navy built them much larger than any other nation has done so far. As a result, the speedboats can fire their torpedoes accurately in winds blowing up to velocity 6.

German speedboats were first spoken of in connection with the last phase of Dunkirk. A year ago it was already announced that the greater part of the three million tons sunk by German surface vessels was accounted for by the speedboats. Owing to their speed and maneuverability and their large radius of action, the German speedboats now dominate the English Channel and the approaches to all British naval bases in spite of shallow water and minefields.

We know too little as yet about the tactics employed by the German and Italian speedboats in the present war and their achievements to be able to comment on them.

* * *

The idea of MAS-carrier-ships resulted in endless arguments for Costanzo Ciano after the war when he, a highly efficient Minister of Communications in Italy, never forgot his beloved MAS. But he had no influence on naval decisions. The war was a past ordeal, and the famous "theoretical experts" kept a jealous watch that nobody might interfere with their lucubrations.

We who have spent the three most interesting years of our lives fighting on the MAS for our country cannot help but agree with Leonardo da Vinci's opinion when he wrote: "*Se hai da trattar con l'acqua, pria l'esperienza, indi la ragion delle cose!*" (If you must deal with the water, experience first—then theory!)

An observation of the results obtained with new weapons, both in the Great War and in the present struggle, reveals the rise of a new ethic in tactics and strategy. This ethic has its main pillar in the bravery of the individual who is fired by the spirit of his group. Organization is only a common denominator of individual pluck.

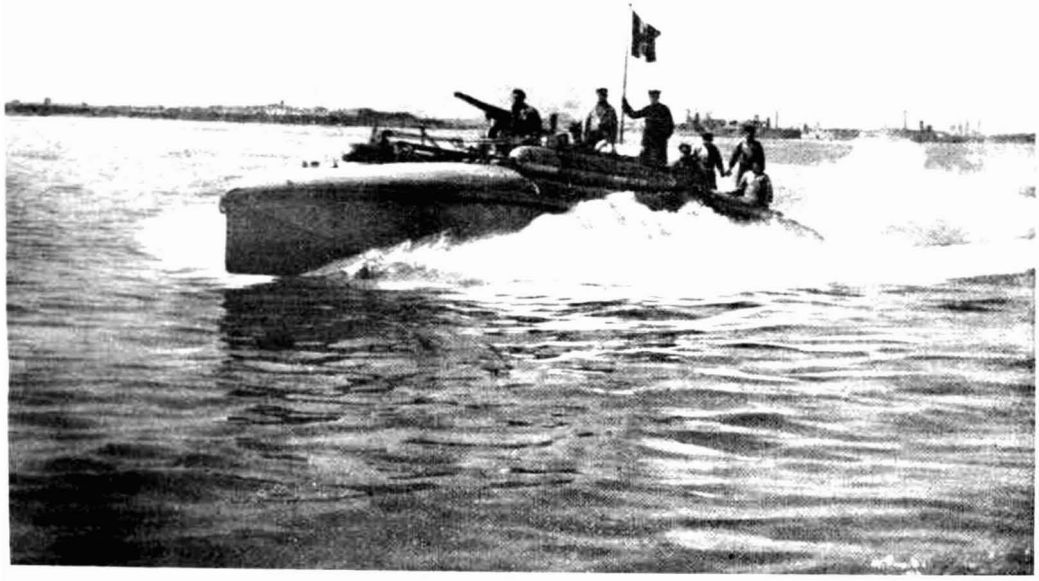
Speedboats, airplanes, submarines, and panzers have come to the fore in modern warfare. All these new weapons have meaning only in the hands of outstandingly brave individuals. Average men could never have obtained the results of the present submarine warfare, exploits like De Grossi's sinking of two American battleships, attacks like those at Suda, Alexandria, Gibraltar, Pearl Harbor, the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, or the destruction of whole fleets of aircraft carriers and cruisers in the battles of the Solomon Islands.

Let me end with another observation that is just as significant: No record of this kind is as yet to be found on the side of the Democracies!

A true knight is fuller of bravery in the midst, than in the beginning of danger.

Sir Philip Sidney,
(1554—1586)

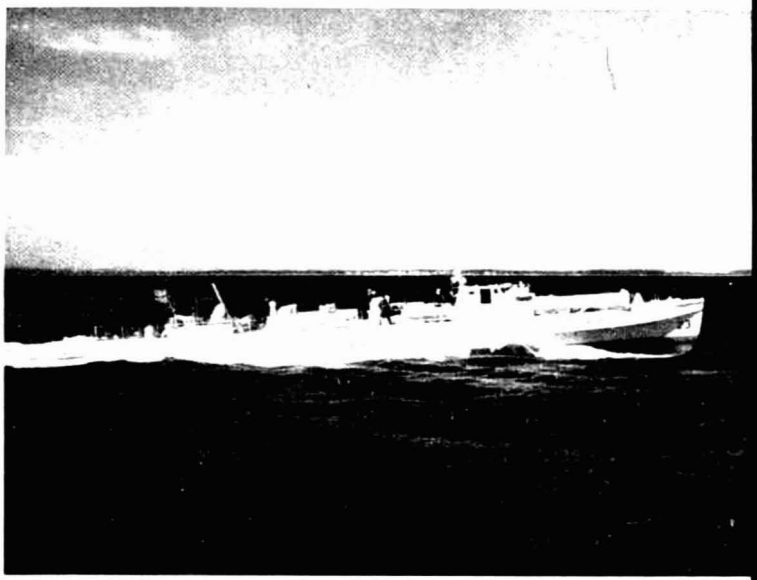
THE EVOLUTION OF SPEEDBOATS



One of the very first "MAS" boats to be built, being tested in 1916 at Brindisi

Modern Italian motor torpedo boats speeding towards the enemy with their deadly cargo

Captain C. Pagano di Melito, one of the two commanders of the 1st Squadriglia MAS, in 1918



Latest type of speedboat of the German Navy